

Money for schools is still not enough | Editorial

By JERRY CORNFIELD

Mercer Island Reporter

Mar 11, 2015

A stream of bills flowing through the state House and Senate would pour several hundred million more dollars into educating children in Washington.

But little, if any, of that proposed spending would bring the state closer to fully funding public schools, as required by the McCleary state Supreme Court decision.

Lawmakers aren't sweating it too much — not yet, anyway — because state tax revenue is expected to increase in coming years after years-long recession.

They know that satisfying the court will require a significant sum — in excess of \$1 billion — in the next state budget. But there is a raft of other issues involving students and teachers that cannot be ignored, even if they, too, cost a bit of money.

"I think people understand that there are two conversations going on here," said Rep. Lillian Ortiz-Self, D-Mukilteo, vice chairwoman of the House Education Committee. The committee had approved 37 bills as of last week.

"We've already been told by the court what has to be funded," she said. "We have to continue fixing the (entire) system. We cannot put our children on hold. We must work to make sure all children in Washington succeed."

Sen. Steve Litzow, R-Mercer Island, chairman of the Senate Early Learning and K-12 Education Committee, said lawmakers understand a lot more money will be spent on education this session, and getting the most out of those dollars is what other bills address. His panel has passed 39 bills.

"Money has never been the issue. The issue has been the consequences and what you fund and how you fund it," he said. "How do you get that money to work harder?"

In 2012, the Supreme Court ruled that lawmakers were violating Washington's constitution by not ensuring the state pays the full cost of a basic education for elementary and secondary students. Justices set a 2018 deadline to comply. Last year they found lawmakers in contempt for moving too slow.

The state will have spent \$15.3 billion of its general fund on public schools in the two-year budget that ends June 30. Another estimated \$2 billion to \$2.5 billion will be

needed to meet the McCleary obligation by 2018 — and that's without spending money on other education programs.

In December, Gov. Jay Inslee proposed a budget for the next biennium containing roughly \$1.5 billion for McCleary-related items, including expanding all-day kindergarten statewide, reducing class sizes in grades K thru 3 and providing a cost-of-living increase for teachers. There's also money for materials, supplies and operating expenses.

House Democrats are expected to release their budget the week of March 23. Senate Republicans will be the last to put forth a budget this session.

In the meantime, the education committees in the House and Senate had each approved nearly 40 bills as of last week which, if enacted as written, would cost between \$300 million and \$350 million in the next biennium.

The most expensive is House Bill 1491, introduced by Rep. Ruth Kagi, R-Seattle. It would cost \$204 million, with the money spent to expand the state's pre-school program, known as Early Achievers, and improve the quality of child care services. Litzow wrote a companion measure in the Senate.

Early learning programs are not legally part of basic education, so they aren't considered part of the McCleary case. But Democrats and Republicans say early childhood education is critically important to academic success in later grades and must not suffer because of the spending elsewhere mandated by the court.

"We're pouring billions of dollars into K-12. We need to start investing in early learning. It's the best return on investment," Litzow said.

As of Friday, some of the bills had passed one chamber and were headed to the other.

House Minority Leader Dan Kristiansen, R-Snohomish, said this is a key period in the session. The focus of legislators begins to pivot toward the budget, and authors of all those bills try to attract broad enough support to secure consideration.

"Everybody knows more money is going to go to McCleary," he said. "Nobody knows how much more after that."

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